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ABSTRACT

Today's school children often come from homes that are dramatically different from those of 25 years ago. To help this new generation of students, many schools have developed advisor/advisee programs; tips on how a school can start such a program are covered in this booklet. Its main purpose is to outline the basic features of a successful program so that fundamental ideas can be adapted for programs ranging from elementary school through high school, in either rural or urban areas. Advisor/advisee programs give students the opportunity to develop self-understanding and positive self-esteem. A primary goal is to help students feel significant and to guide them in developing meaningful interpersonal relationships. The text opens with a detailed outline of how to start an advisor/advisee program, and discusses such topics as program leadership, staff development, program design, group organization, examples of group formats, program activities, and some obstacles to success. Some of the benefits derived from an effective advisor/advisee program, such as enhancing the educational environment, are also presented. It is argued that the counterpart of intellect is affect, and that school personnel must address both aspects of students' lives in order to be effective teachers. (RJM)

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Developing an Effective Advisor/Advisee Program

Phyllis E. Dale

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PHYLLIS E. DALE

Phyllis Ekeland Dale has been a music teacher at Eastern Middle School in Greenwich, Connecticut, since 1978. She teaches choral music, general music, guitar, recorder, musical theater, theory, and an extensive drama program. Dale is a learning facilitator at Eastern Middle School and coordinates the school's advisor/advisee program. She also has been a teacher trainer and mentor teacher for the BEST program in Connecticut for eight years.

Dale received her B.S. in music from Wagner College in 1967. She received an M.S. in music education in 1971 from Richmond College of the City University of New York and an Ed.D. in administration and supervision in 1993 from Fordham University.

She currently is vice president of the Fordham University Chapter of Phi Delta Kappa. She wishes to thank her colleagues for the support and encouragement they have given for her research.

Developing an Effective Advisor/Advisee Program

by
Phyllis E. Dale

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Why Develop an Advisor/Advisee Program?

Today's children often come to school from homes that are very different from those of 25 years ago. There are more latchkey children who go home to empty houses and apartments, more single-parent homes, and fewer extended families to look to for support. Because of these societal changes, Long and Long (1989) suggest that school sometimes is the single stabilizing factor in a child's life, providing "more structure and stability than they receive from any other source. Time spent at school may represent the only positive interaction with peers and adults during an entire day."

To enhance this positive interaction, many schools — particularly middle schools — have developed advisor/advisee programs. In an advisor/advisee program, each student in the school is assigned to a small group of peers with a school adult who acts as a student advocate. Such programs provide opportunities for students to build intergenerational relationships based on understanding, trust, and commitment.

Advisor/advisee programs aim to give students the opportunity to develop self-understanding and positive self-esteem. A primary goal of such programs is to assist each student to feel "significant." Students develop meaningful interpersonal relationships. They develop a close relationship with a faculty advisor and respect and understanding among students and adults.

Well-developed advisor/advisee programs are an effective means for administrators and teachers to become involved with the social,

emotional, and academic development of their students. James (1986) suggests that the advisory concept means that each student has an adult advocate in the school who can assist the advisee's cause in student-teacher, student-administrator, and student-student problems. The advisor might become the best adult school friend for the student, helping to personalize the learning experience.

Students at all levels can benefit from an increased sense of family within the school setting. The advisor/advisee program accomplishes that end by structuring experiences and activities that help students learn how to get along with others, take responsibility, and make decisions. Advisors also encourage student participation in extracurricular school activities and assist in organizing social activities for large and small groups so that the advisor/advisee concept can be expanded to encompass the entire school experience.

But advisor/advisee programs also give students a chance to discuss issues of interest to their age group. These small-group discussions — a key feature of an advisor/advisee program — let students hear what their peers think about, worry about, and care about. And such discussions also give them the opportunity to voice their own thoughts in a risk-free setting, where their opinions will be heard and not judged.

The purpose of this fastback is to outline the basic features of a successful advisor/advisee program. The basics can be adapted for programs from elementary school through high school, and they can be tailored to the specific needs of urban, suburban, or rural settings.

How to Start an Advisor/Advisee Program

Most advisor/advisee programs begin with a well-conceived proposal. This proposal may be developed by a group of interested teachers for initial presentation to their principal, or the proposal may be developed by a principal and key staff in order to present the idea to the superintendent and the school board.

The proposal to begin an advisor/advisee program should describe the basic elements of the program, what it will accomplish, and why it is important for students. It should include:

- research reports on existing advisor/advisee programs
- expected program outcomes
- staff development considerations
- implementation plans

Often, the most significant factor in obtaining approval to start an advisor/advisee program is staff development. How much staff training will be needed? When will the training be done? Administrative support will be necessary in order to obtain staff development time and funds. And adequate staff training is necessary for a successful program.

Program Leadership

Clearly, advisor/advisee programs thrive best in schools where the principal employs an open leadership style and includes teachers in the decision-making process. In an open environment, teachers are more

likely to become engaged in the planning and implementation of school programs and more likely to have feelings of ownership and responsibility for their success.

From the beginning, staff involvement is essential in the development of an advisor/advisee program. Whether the idea for the program originates with a committed teacher or with the principal, interested teachers should be sought to participate in a steering committee that will provide leadership for the program's initial development. When the idea begins with a teacher, the principal should be involved as soon as possible.

The principal can formally create a position of program coordinator to be filled by a teacher. This program coordinator will be responsible, initially, for orchestrating the work of the steering committee so that a proposal for the advisor/advisee program can be developed and put before the approving officials. Later, when the program has gained approval, the coordinator will be responsible for providing advisors with materials, planning schedules, and assisting in the design of staff development opportunities.

Each teacher-advisor also is a leader. The program's real success depends on the individual advisors. Each advisor is responsible for creating a comfortable, nonthreatening environment that will encourage the students to share in the advisor/advisee experience and to regard their group as an extended family.

Staff Development

In order for the advisor/advisee program to succeed, the teacher-advisors must understand the goals of the program. Staff development should cover basic information, such as program philosophy, but it also should help advisors build a repertoire of interpersonal skills for working with students on an affective level. Such skills include building group bonding, leading discussions in small groups, and assisting students with social and emotional problems.

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Because staff development needs to be ongoing, schools and districts must commit to funding and logistical support beyond the program start-up. Advisors will need periodic training and reinforcement. They also will benefit from opportunities to share their experiences with other advisors. Inviting inspirational presenters and outside consultants to interact with the advisors also can be productive.

An advisor/advisee program that I recently studied took a systematic approach to staff development that worked well. First, the program leaders provided staff training on the history and purpose of the program and allowed staff to visit schools with advisor/advisee programs in place. Then the leaders provided training in how to be an advisor, for example, what types of activities to use and how to work with small groups. Prior to the program's implementation, the school district allowed the school where the program was to be implemented to dismiss students early on six half-days during the year in order for the staff development activities to take place. All staff members were encouraged to participate in planning the advisor/advisee program. And some teachers were invited to teach some of the staff development classes (Dale 1993).

Program Design

Advisor/advisee programs are an effective way for administrators and teachers to be involved with the social, emotional, and academic development of their students. Research suggests that these programs should create opportunities for social and academic support activities, provide career information and guidance, help students develop their self-concepts and self-esteem, offer leadership training, and allow students to discuss personal or family problems, social relationships, health issues, and moral and ethical issues.

In a well-designed program an advisor gets to know the advisees well and is able to help the students with both academic and personal matters. The advisor might play an advocacy role, dealing with other

teachers, students, and parents. An advisor has four main roles: friend, advocate, counselor, and parent contact (Kratzer 1984).

How schools design advisor/advisee programs varies depending on the school's and students' needs and schedules. Regardless of other elements, the core of any advisor/advisee program is the small-group meeting. Students are assigned to small groups led by a teacher-advisor. Typically, these groups meet daily for some length of time.

The central objective, which the small group is specifically designed to meet, is to provide students with a close community of peers with whom they can comfortably and confidentially discuss issues of importance. Linton and Forster (1990) emphasize the benefits of positive peer interaction, with students acting as role models to achieve individual student goals and to enforce attitudinal and behavioral expectations.

Advisor/advisee groups also can be used, when necessary, to deal with traumatic events and emergencies that affect the school community, such as the death of a student or teacher. Indeed, the supportive environment of the small group that is already in place because of the advisor/advisee program greatly facilitates dealing with schoolwide trauma.

Group Organization

A student may be assigned to an advisor for one year or for all of his or her years at the school. Students may be grouped by grade level or mixed in multi-grade groups. No specific group organization characterizes the effective advisor/advisee program.

My recent research leads me to suggest that assigning students to mixed-grade advisor/advisee groups has schoolwide benefits in addition to benefits for the individual student (Dale 1993). Students are able to develop friendships with many more students than when grouped by grade level. Because of the different learning levels in the group, the students may be better able to help each other with things such as homework and advice about school rules. Mixed-grade groups may be better able to keep a student from being "bullied." Teachers also gain

the opportunity to know students at different grade levels, rather than students only in the grade they teach. These features help to create a more friendly, caring, and helpful school community.

Many advisor/advisee groups meet at the beginning of the school day to take care of school tasks, such as attendance, announcements, and weekly calendars. During this time together the advisor also has the opportunity to focus on and make contact with each student in the group. In some schools, the school day also ends with the group coming together, giving advisors and advisees the chance to discuss the day's activities, successes and problems, and plans for the following day.

Advisor/advisee groups usually meet at least every other week for a larger block of time — perhaps 45 minutes — in addition to the short, daily meetings. Advisors and advisees use this longer time period to engage in in-depth discussions and participate in more structured activities.

Examples of Group Formats

Evans and colleagues (1990) describe an advisor/advisee program in which students select their advisor, and teachers have the right to decline. Groups of 10 to 15 students and an advisor meet daily for socializing activities and weekly in a discussion group. The students also meet with the advisor monthly on a one-on-one basis to monitor academic progress and discuss problems. The advisor also acts as each advisee's advocate to deal with parents and other teachers.

Burkhardt and Fusco (1984) describe an advisor/advisee program in which the advisees and advisor meet for 12 minutes each morning and then eat lunch together every day. The advisor is responsible for meeting with the advisees' parents, completing advisees' report cards, and acting as an advocate in conflict situations.

Kratzer (1984) describes a program in which each group meets at the beginning and end of each day for 10 to 15 minutes. Usually, two groups are paired, with a male and a female advisor. An additional half-

hour advisor/advisee period two days each week is scheduled for both group activities and individual meetings with students. This program's premise is that it does not exist in isolation but is a part of a larger schoolwide effort to focus on the individual student and to assist each student in making the most of the school experience. To instill the habit of reading in students, this program incorporates a sustained silent reading time each morning. The group stays together during this time.

In my own research, I reviewed a program in which the groups meet at the beginning of each day. This meeting is used to check attendance, make announcements, and see to students' individual needs. Students enter the building in the morning and go directly to advisor/advisee group, where they chat with one another and the advisor in an informal setting. The students are assigned to mixed-grade groups because there was a strong feeling on the part of the staff members that mixed groups might assist students in their interrelationships and improve relations within the school community. This program also incorporates a sustained silent reading time each morning. Then, once every two weeks, the groups meet for a 40-minute period. Two advisors are assigned to each group, multiplying the potential for student-teacher interaction.

Program Activities

Advisor/advisee programs can provide numerous experiences for students. Most attempt to give students experience in making decisions and to encourage students to participate in physical, social, and academic activities outside the classroom. Most advisors also monitor each student's academic program and progress, and they help the student negotiate class and schedule changes when necessary.

Program activities at the beginning of the school year focus on orientation and getting acquainted. Students learn about one another, their teachers, their advisor, and the school in general. Many groups use role-playing to work through typical school situations and to encourage peer interaction that can eliminate fears and self-doubt associated with being in a new school or class.

The program coordinator and the teacher-advisors also meet at the beginning of the year to discuss specific directions for the program, possible activities, and logistical needs, such as supplies or transportation for special events.

Students of all ages prefer activities that allow them to move about — in short, to be active. Games, particularly those that incorporate physical movement, and role-playing are favorites for most age groups. Lively, open discussions also engage students' interest, provided that all students have an opportunity to contribute to the discussion. Other activities that work well include:

- *International Day* or *Multicultural Day*. Students develop projects that involve learning about and valuing different cultures.
- *Human Relations Day*. Students focus on activities that promote trust, tolerance, and understanding among people.
- *Community service projects*. Students can make decorations for nursing homes or write poems or letters for shut-ins. They can develop assistance projects, such as collecting canned goods for the community pantry.

Group meetings that offer variety keep students interested and active. Not every meeting must center on a serious discussion or solve a problem. Some can be just for fun. And occasional refreshments, such as juice and donuts, can be an added treat.

Obstacles to Success

In developing a successful advisor/advisee program, organizers must be aware of several potential pitfalls and understand how to avoid them. These pitfalls are in five categories: leadership, goals, staff development, scheduling, and coordination.

Leadership. It takes an effective instructional leader to oversee a successful program. This person in most cases is the principal. The effective principal will be aware of the educational consequences of

scheduling decisions. To ensure that the effect of implementing an advisor/advisee program is positive, the principal must closely monitor the program so that advisors are held accountable for maximizing student learning and meeting students' needs. The principal also must allocate time and resources so that administration and staff can develop and maintain the program that they believe will be most helpful to achieve instructional goals (Donmoyer and Wagstaff 1990).

To maximize the chances of program success, the principal's leadership should be collegial and shared with teachers, providing opportunities for them to be actively involved in the program's development, working from a strong group commitment to the program, and bringing about change through consensus.

Goals. When teachers are not provided with clear program goals, a high level of stress and frustration results that will undermine the success of the program. Advisors need to participate in the process of creating the directions that the advisor/advisee program will take. Each school must evaluate the specific needs of its students and the strengths of its teachers in order to create meaningful goals and objectives that they can implement successfully.

Typical advisor/advisee program goals include:

- assisting students in understanding themselves and others;
- developing self-concept and self-esteem;
- developing interpersonal skills;
- developing decision-making skills;
- providing students with an adult advocate;
- creating a sense of family within the school community; and
- monitoring students' academic programs and grades.

Staff development must be tied to the goals of the program. And program goals need to be constantly reassessed and recreated to meet the changing needs of the students and staff.

One advisor/advisee program that I discovered in my research states that its goal is to "further humanize the learning process through the

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establishment of a teacher/advisor system" (Dale 1993). It lists the following objectives:

1. Have students get to know teachers.
2. Improve communication between faculty and students.
3. Make education more meaningful.
4. Help students better understand themselves.
5. Reduce the anxiety level of students.
6. Have students better understand their role in their environment.
7. Have each student known and understood by a staff member.
8. Make students more sensitive to the needs of others.
9. Have students better understand their rights and responsibilities.
10. Assist students in planning, decision making, and organizational skills.

Another school suggests that a good advisor has the following characteristics:

- cares about kids;
- is a good listener;
- shares his or her experiences;
- has knowledge of learning and personality styles;
- has a good sense of humor;
- has compassion; and
- has a commitment to the program.

Clearly stating and communicating the goals of the advisor/advisee program is an essential first step toward success.

Staff Development. To develop an effective program, staff development must be offered that includes teachers in the program's initial structuring, implementation, maintenance, and refinement (Loucks and Zigarmi 1981).

Advisors with whom I have spoken believe that in order for the program to be successful, they need continual training and reinforcement. Formal training programs are not always necessary. But time to share

ideas, to view demonstrations of new activities, and to hear about other schools' programs is essential. Advisors also benefit from being paired with a "buddy" advisor to share resources and solve problems. And this is especially true for teachers new to the advisor/advisee program, who will find an experienced mentor to be an invaluable resource.

Scheduling. Perhaps the greatest potential obstacle to success is the school schedule. How will the advisor/advisee program fit into an already crowded and complicated school schedule?

One key is flexibility. The amount of time allocated to an advisor/advisee program might vary from day to day, depending on a school's programs and the students' needs. However, at a minimum, each group must meet once each day so that students will be able to interact with their advisors and peers in the group. In some cases, this time already exists in the form of a homeroom period, which can be adapted for the advisor/advisee program. Where a ready schedule slot does not exist, the principal (working with the program coordinator and the steering committee) must develop a viable alternative schedule.

If the advisor/advisee program does not meet on a regular schedule; if advisors do not receive adequate notification of meeting dates and times; if only some groups meet, while others fail to meet; if only short time blocks are occasionally placed on the schedule for a meeting — then both advisors and advisees perceive that the program is unimportant, and the program will fail. Advisors to whom I have talked report that a major obstacle to a program's success is the lack of "consistent meeting time" (Dale 1993). In order for the program to work, for it "to jell," for the group process to take place as it should take place, groups need to meet consistently.

Scheduling is a sticky problem. When the advisor/advisee program is not scheduled in a regular time slot as if it were a period of the day, it has to be added into the day's schedule by taking the time from someplace else, such as teacher team meeting time or a regularly scheduled class. Scheduling the program by "stealing" time from a class annoys

teachers, who often already feel as though they do not have enough time. Likewise, some schools have scheduled advisor/advisee groups to meet during teacher-team meeting time. This option also creates problems, because the teacher-team meeting time has specific purposes that teachers find difficult to sacrifice or reschedule.

Other problems arise when the entire school does not meet in advisor/advisee groups at the same time. Disjointed program meeting times make it almost impossible to use specialist teachers (such as music, physical education, or art teachers) as advisors. This creates an additional obstacle if other teachers resent the fact that not all teachers are asked to serve as advisors.

Coordination. Successful advisors emphasize that the advisor/advisee program needs coordination and leadership. The consensus is that the program coordinator should be a teacher, rather than an administrator. The coordinator does the basic program preparation; otherwise, managing the advisor/advisee group becomes another "class preparation" for teachers, which not only may diminish teachers' enthusiasm for the program but also may result in contractual problems.

However, the coordinator should not work in isolation. He or she should form a committee to work on program activities, to select materials, and to evaluate the program. Members of this committee also may have served on the initial steering committee.

Finally, an effective program coordinator ensures continuity from year to year. As experience with the advisor/advisee program grows, solid coordination means that teachers do not have to "start from scratch" every fall.

The Benefits of an Effective Advisor/Advisee Program

Although advisor/advisee programs vary from school to school, students and staff tend to be very enthusiastic about such programs. Outcomes will depend on the particular focus the school has chosen for the program. However, in an effective advisor/advisee program, the following benefits should be evident:

1. *Students have greater opportunities to develop more and closer friendships with school adults.* Students indicate that they think this is beneficial to their school success and experiences. When students know an advisor well, they are more likely to approach that person for assistance. Many staff members identify this factor as being a primary outcome of the program.

2. *Students have greater opportunity to develop more and closer friendships with peers (in all grade levels, if mixed grouping).* The advisor/advisee group often becomes a meeting place for friends. Through this group, students get to know individuals with whom they would not normally have classes. Advisees learn to be tolerant of one another.

3. *The school has a calmer, more friendly environment.* Advisor/advisee programs foster school unity and overall good interrelationships.

4. *Students have the opportunity to discuss issues of importance to them with peers and an adult in school.* In the academic classroom setting, teachers are teaching their subject and do not have time to interrupt

lessons for personal discussions. Students in advisor/advisee groups report that they like to hear what other students think. The group provides a "support system." Students also like hearing what the advisors think about the issues that are discussed. These informal discussions let students know that they are not alone with their thoughts, concerns, or worries.

5. *Students receive academic assistance, such as help with homework, tutoring by the advisor or peers, monitoring of grades, or just pep talks and suggestions on how to improve.* Students emphasize the importance of this outcome. Some students come from homes where little or no interest is shown in academic achievement or grades. Group interaction might be the only feedback and assistance some advisees receive.

6. *Advisors have the chance to become student advocates.* Some teachers say the group is "like a school within a school," where they really get to know their students and develop rapport.

7. *The program creates a "sense of family or belonging."* The advisor tries to create an environment that is nonthreatening — a "safe haven."

8. *Both advisees and the advisor have a place to go each morning, where they can just sit and talk, relax, and not feel pressured.* The program provides a chance for students to see teachers in a different light.

9. *Teachers get to know students they would not normally have in class, and to become familiar with a larger portion of the student body.* Teachers gain a fuller view of the total school community through their advisees.

10. *Advisees receive help to improve their organizational skills.* Belonging to a group provides students with a place to go to receive information on the daily, weekly, and monthly schedules and how those schedules affect their school life. There are fewer "shocks and surprises."

11. *Small group forums discuss such issues as ethnicity, family heritage, discrimination, respect, and tolerance that may not be discussed*

elsewhere. By providing such forums, the program opens the door to promoting tolerance and understanding. Students learn to accept each other and to think about how they treat each other. Group discussion can make them conscious of prejudices and teach them how to deal with them.

12. *In schools that pair advisors, teachers have the opportunity to get to know a colleague more personally and are able to learn from each other.* Colleagues have the opportunity to share ideas, make new adult friendships at school, and get to know people on the staff better.

Conclusion

A successful advisor/advisee program requires the participation of the entire staff. But such a program also offers important opportunities for leadership and shared decisions. In fact, these are key characteristics for success.

The job of the school today is much more difficult and complex than it was in the past. Twenty or 25 years ago, more students came from supportive home environments and school was less the major focus of their lives. Today's students face greater personal challenges and often, because of strained family circumstances, must face them alone.

An advisor/advisee program can assist schools in addressing some of the affective needs of their students. The advisor/advisee groups become extended families where peer support is nurtured and encouraged and where a caring adult models responsibility, caring, and leadership.

To be fully successful, schools cannot afford to neglect this affective dimension. Teachers and administrators cannot focus solely on the academic achievement and test scores of their students. Indeed, to do so would be counter-productive. The counterpart of intellect is affect, and the schools of the 21st century must meet the individual affective needs of their students if they want to achieve meaningful results. This requires providing students with opportunities to create meaningful relationships with adults and peers, which can be done through an effective advisor/advisee program.

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Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation

The Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation was established on 13 October 1966 with the signing, by Dr. George H. Reavis, of the irrevocable trust agreement creating the Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation Trust.

George H. Reavis (1883-1970) entered the education profession after graduating from Warrensburg Missouri State Teachers College in 1906 and the University of Missouri in 1911. He went on to earn an M.A. and a Ph.D. at Columbia University. Dr. Reavis served as assistant superintendent of schools in Maryland and dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and the School of Education at the University of Pittsburgh. In 1929 he was appointed director of instruction for the Ohio State Department of Education. But it was as assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction in the Cincinnati public schools (1939-48) that he rose to national prominence.

Dr. Reavis' dream for the Educational Foundation was to make it possible for seasoned educators to write and publish the wisdom they had acquired over a lifetime of professional activity. He wanted educators and the general public to "better understand (1) the nature of the educative process and (2) the relation of education to human welfare."

The Phi Delta Kappa fastbacks were begun in 1972. These publications, along with monographs and books on a wide range of topics related to education, are the realization of that dream.